the assuaging of the waters

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the assuaging of the waters

by ifonlyiwaswittier

Summary

After emerging from the Atlantic, Will and Hannibal retreat to an entirely different kind of cliff house— an isolated mountainside home in the remote Canadian Rockies— where their intimacy deepens as Will learns to see Hannibal again.

“And the waters were assuaged and the wells of the sea were closed, and the windows of heavens were closed, and the rains of the heavens were ceased.”

(or: the obligatory post-fall working things out/falling-in-love-again fic)

Notes

thank you to all the friends who intervened along the way to prevent me from sounding like a fool about classical music, love & light <3

See the end of the work for more notes

It is a gray, drizzly morning when Will realizes he's happy. He's on one of his long, rambling walks through the wooded mountainside behind their house, still not well enough to run. As much as he's tempted to push himself— for the exhilaration of relishing in his body's strength, for the satisfaction of brushing around the edges of his limits— he knows Hannibal would be displeased with him. And even though Will's beginning to suspect that nothing more would come of Hannibal's displeasure than a weary sideways glance or possibly a solemn lecture on the importance of rest and recuperation, Will finds himself bizarrely disinclined to rankle Hannibal lately, not in any way more serious than the irritations and needlings that mask concern and affection alike. So, instead of running, Will walks. He can do that just fine, now that the bruising from their crash into the Atlantic has faded from a sallow yellow into the milky paleness of bedridden skin. It's not like his cheek— stubbornly still tender, even as his shoulder has healed admirably under Hannibal's ministrations— has anything to do with his gait so even Hannibal can't object.

It's become a routine, these walks. He walks and he walks, among the gnarled roots of the conifers, each morning carving out a different path through the seas of fog. He walks along the stream, watching from a distance the squirrels and birds and the occasional fox who all remind him that maybe it isn't so bad to spend time with creatures who've never seen anyone like him before, an idea that had long been tainted by his time with humans who thought the same. He walks until he's overcome with how much he misses Hannibal, how much he misses his nearness, as smooth and warm as the handle of a well-loved knife, and turns to walk home again.

Among his newfound knowledge of his own happiness, there are many things that Will has learned since he'd dragged Hannibal and himself ashore sick with pain, but mostly sick with the realization that he'd been wrong, so terribly wrong. The first of these discoveries was that Hannibal's teeth chatter. Will wasn't sure why this surprised him so much— his own body was shivering after their nighttime plunge into the Atlantic— until he realized that he'd never really considered Hannibal fully human until then. He'd always seen him as something *more* until Hannibal had looked up at him from that rocky shore, lips blue and trembling, like Will was Saint Peter and had just granted him entry to heaven. Will had thought about kissing him then, kissing him until his lips were flush and pink again, but shook off the thought as a delirious adrenaline-induced fantasy.

At first, Will kept a mental catalog of every new revelation about Hannibal. Not intentionally, but especially in those early days, hunkered down in a motel room for fear of capture, there was little else besides muted daytime television to occupy his mind; it was hard to stop himself from turning each new piece of knowledge in his hands like rosary beads, worrying down the edges of his wonder the way water smooths out sea glass.

Hannibal prefers saltines to Ritz crackers.

Hannibal refuses to sleep with socks on, even when the flukey motel air conditioner chills his toes.

Hannibal is terrible at Wheel of Fortune because he overthinks all the puzzles, even while he insists it's the painkillers dulling his faculties; it's the first time Will has seen Hannibal unable to perfect a skill on the first try.

Will finds himself holding the odd, inexplicable, desire to accommodate the quirks of a man who has tried to ruin his life over and over (*out of love* , a not-insignificant part of his mind reminds him, even as Will bats the thought away like a pesky sprite) and has now, finally, succeeded. And yet— foolishly or foolhardily, only time will tell which— he pays extra attention to the crackers he grabs at the gas station; he tucks the blankets back around Hannibal's feet when he kicks them off in the feverish, drug-haze of his nightmares; he doesn't ruin the game show by spoiling the answers even as Hannibal expounds on the origins of a phrase and the possible etymology of the answers. Will had known he was a vulnerability of Hannibal's, but he'd never considered that Hannibal would be vulnerable to all the things normal people are too— lack of sleep, high doses of opiates that leave him swimming in and out of lucidity, air conditioning units that turn themselves on as if by magic — until he'd dug his fingers into Hannibal's bullet wound to check for organ damage.

Eventually, he loses count of all these little revelations— quirks that make him realize the amount of time they've spent together isn't actually all that great. How many times had they ever even slept in the same building— a handful, maybe— let alone in the same bed? Let alone with their faces so close that Will can feel Hannibal's breathing against his cheek, a reminder that neither of them is dead? And even that was years ago. Prison changes people; marriage changes people.

They are long past those early days now, though, and through the months they've been tucked away in the house nestled deep in the mountains it's become clear that some things never change.

"Perfect timing," Hannibal greets Will when he returns from his morning walk today. "The omelets are nearly ready."

Will as he shakes the mist off his rain jacket and hangs it by the kitchen door before turning to look at Hannibal. His face is soft with pleased contentment— another thing Will has learned: it pleases Hannibal to please him. Another thing Will is still suspicious of: it pleases Hannibal to please him.

But despite himself, Will smiles at Hannibal as he finishes untying his boots.

"Smells great. I'm starving," he says, putting his boots on the rack. Then, adds, "the creek is going to overflow if we keep getting rain like this"

"Some banks are meant to be overrun," Hannibal replies, "some barriers meant to be broken. It's the natural order of things here, after all."

Hannibal has already laid out the newspaper— where he keeps procuring them, Will doesn't ask— and the dark green coffee mug Will favors, steaming from a little white saucer in anticipation of Will's return. And that is yet another thing he's learned: Hannibal trusts he will return. Taking a seat at the table Hannibal has already set for him, Will is beginning to trust it himself. He unfolds the paper and waits to be served.

Will has found that the two of them move in each other's orbit even as they both go about their days separately. The house affords them more than enough space to sequester themselves but he's learning that neither of them wants to. It's massive, at least by Will's standards. There are three bedrooms accompanied by an ensuite bathroom (though they've only ever used the one), two rooms that are outfitted as studies (one of them decorated much like Hannibal's office in Baltimore but the other— outfitted in more natural tones with conspicuously few bold patterns— makes him wonder how long this was Hannibal's endgame), a sitting room on both floors, a palatial kitchen with a separate dining room attached, and a living room with floor to ceiling bookshelves on one side and floor to ceiling windows on the other.

This room— the living room— is Will's favorite in the house. He likes the windows that look down the mountainside they're perched on; when the fog gathers below them and swallows the trees, it looks like he and Hannibal are suspended at the edge of the world. It's a pleasant thrill of vertigo to see the vast expanse of clouds undulating like a bed sheet laid out across the treetops and he feels that their house, a little glass box hovering in the sky, is the only thing separating him from falling into an abyss, even while he rationally knows that the tops of the trees are only a few feet below the windows. On clear mornings, he will sink into the loveseat, a plush thing that doesn't match any of the other furniture in the room, and read as the tops of the trees sway in the periphery of his vision. The windows were what immediately drew him to the space— and Will can't help but wonder if that was part of why Hannibal chose this house for them out of all the ones he must own— but here is what he's learned about the room since: through the wide, airy hallway that runs like an artery through the center of the house, he can see most of the kitchen from the loveseat.

It gives Will ample opportunities to watch Hannibal from a distance— to learn the customs in this world of dusted chrome and gleaming knives like an anthropologist, to observe the grace of movements the way a naturalist observes a tiger in its natural habitat— free of the sensation that he's being watched back. As soon as Hannibal could stand for any length of time, he was back in the kitchen, and Will watched from the living room as Hannibal marinated meats, kneaded doughs, and caramelized onions for the meals he would serve Will. It frustrates Hannibal, though— his new lack of stamina— and Will can tell it does even if he tries to hide it, even if he adamantly denies that he's disgruntled whenever Will suggests.

"It's the mark of any talented chef to be able to adapt to the circumstances at hand," he'd told Will many times since. Adapting, apparently, looks like prepping vegetables while sitting on the barstool Will conveniently "forgets" to put back at the kitchen island. Adapting also means, much to Will's pleasure, Hannibal barely puts up a fight whenever Will suggests he take a break and join him on the loveseat. Often, now, he drifts over to Will's spot by the living room windows and rests with him on the loveseat.

That is how they are this afternoon, Will satisfied that he's washed the lunch dishes to Hannibal's standards and Hannibal satisfied to keep Will company until he must tend to the soup simmering on the stove. The soft cushions of the loveseat sink either their weight until they're sliding into each other, coming to rest shoulders touching. It's nearly dark outside despite the hour, the cloud cover smothering out the last remains of sunlight. But it's also unseasonably warm, and together they watch the grey jays, almost the same shade of

graphite-stained white as the fog, fluttering in and out of sight as they hop between the branches.

“You carried me,” Hannibal says out of the blue, breaking the lazy mid-afternoon lull. It startles Will and he blinks hard, pulling himself back from the haze he’d slipped into, swept away by the birdsong and the warm press of Hannibal’s body and the trails of rain cutting paths down the windows.

“You carried me,” Hannibal repeats, eyes focused on where the treetops sway below them, barely poking out of the fog. “Up the cliffside.”

Will considers saying: *‘dragged you up the cliffside’ would be more accurate and I barely even managed that but yeah, sure, Hannibal* .

He considers saying: *you were so out of it I didn’t think you’d remember* .

The whole house smells of bay leaves and chilies, the rich scents of the pork Menudo Hannibal is simmering for them to share at dinner tonight, just as they have shared dinner every night since they’ve been together, even when all they could stomach was crackers and ginger ale.

He considers saying: *I can’t bear to be separated from you again, Hannibal. I can’t bear to see you hurt by any force but my own. Blood loss, hypothermia, drowning— they can’t have you because you’re mine. You’re mine.*

He considers saying: *You’ve ruined me.*

He considers saying: *Of course, I carried you, Hannibal . Of course.*

“Yes,” he finally says instead. “I did.”

Hannibal inclines his head in a slow nod but doesn’t say anything else. Will looks at him, at those deceptively blank eyes, and thinks *I would do anything for you.* The thought should be horrifying because Will knows better than anyone what *anything* could include but instead, he holds it with quiet exhilaration, a warmth that springs from a deep, previously undiscovered well inside him and seeps out through his limbs until he is suffused in its surety. He wants to spread this realization out like a picnic blanket and settle them both onto it because it’s big enough to hold them both. It’s a knowledge that rests on the base of something else he’s learned recently: Hannibal will never make Will do anything he doesn’t want to, not ever again.

When the little egg-shaped timer in Hannibal’s pocket starts ringing, Hannibal finally looks at Will. He stands, the timer jingling away in one hand, and searches Will’s face— for what, Will doesn’t know. Will reaches up and rests a hand on Hannibal’s shoulder; he feels Hannibal’s whole body relax with a deep sigh, eyes closing. Hannibal brings his free hand to cover Will’s own and squeezes.

The timer rings and rings until Hannibal finally says, “thank you, Will,” solemnly, fervently.

Before Will can respond, he's turned on his heel and is padding in socked feet back to the kitchen, twisting the timer to quiet it.

"You used to play music when you would cook, when you served dinner," Will observes on an uncharacteristically bright afternoon. Spring has snuck up on him, the smallest hints of it peaking around the curtains from the wings of their lives. If this house the mountain's edge was the set, the play unfolding on it would be a rather gentle one, filled with scenes like this:

Leaning against the counter, Will murmurs a soft *thank you* as he accepts the miniature tart that Hannibal plucks from a cooling rack and offers to him. Will bites into it, the sweet fruity filling warm and surprisingly floral as it oozes onto his tongue.

"I did," Hannibal agrees. Then, gestures to the cooling rack as Will takes another, "Fig and almond tarts made with lavender honey and topped with crème chantilly."

"Mm," Will hums around a bite. He'd relaxed his table manners around Hannibal towards the beginning of their stay here, reasoning that it didn't really matter if he ate with his elbows on the table when they could both barely eat at all. The formality of Hannibal's dinners in Baltimore never came back even as the other trappings did— the meticulous platings coordinated across several courses, handmade centerpieces to compliment it all— especially not when he realized Hannibal looked at him with something alarmingly close to endearment, like he is now, when Will cups a hand in front of his chest to catch the crumbs. "It's sumptuous. Did you use almond flour?"

"I did. Although I would consider using a higher ratio of pastry flour and adding almond extract instead if I were to make these again. The dough is a bit more crumbly than I expected."

"Baking at elevation is unpredictable," Will responds. "It took me a while to figure out how to account for altitude. These are good, though, I like them." he adds, plucking another tart from the cooling rack.

Hannibal watches with a look Will has come to recognize, with a mix of barely contained curiosity and awe, like he's brushed away the dust on a box at a junkstore to find out it's a intriguing heirloom.

"What is it?" Will asks him, covering his mouth as he talks around the half of a tart he's still chewing.

"I wasn't aware you'd ever lived in the mountains before, or that you were interested in baking."

Will shrugs and looks to the rack of tarts, feeling a bit helpless under the intensity of Hannibal's interest in him. "My dad took a job near a river in Arizona once. Just some project work, an adventure tour company needed their boats tuned up in the off-season. I still have no idea how he heard about it, it was the furthest west I'd ever been. And we needed to eat so…" he trails off, shrugs again.

Hannibal waits until Will looks up again and then smiles. *The cat that caught the canary* , Will thinks, although he isn't sure who's the cat and who's the canary between the two of them. Hannibal is awfully pleased to be in Will's clutches these days.

"Please," Hannibal encourages. "I've never been to the American southwest. Tell me, Will, how does the culture differ from the eastern seaboard? The perspective of someone as observant as yourself— and an outsider, no less— is certainly intriguing."

Will, despite the blush heating his cheeks, tells Hannibal a story and then another and another, until he's bubbling over with people and places, with the small slights and small joys that pierced through the blanket of his isolation in those days, memories he hasn't thought of in years, memories he'd always thought were tucked inside him alone. Life, he thinks then as he's thought many times before, is an inherently lonely affair, the only other people who carry the same remembrances lost from him for decades now.

But as he spills over the edges of himself, Hannibal, deep as a well, catches him, the only place that's ever been big enough to carry all of him without resistance.

Although they never discuss the topic of Hannibal playing music out loud after the first time Will mentions it, Hannibal takes Will's comment as the permission that it is. There have been bluetooth speakers installed in the kitchen and living room walls this whole time, Will discovers when he comes back from one of his morning walks to find the kitchen filled with music as lush and as rich as the heady scents of pastries that hangs in the air.

"Will," Hannibal says, looking up from the scone he is plating, "good morning. You're just in time. The first movement started only a few minutes ago; the best is yet to come."

He looks rhapsodic this morning and is all the more lovely for it. It feels surreal— not thinking that Hannibal is lovely, as much as Will once would have balked at the idea, but the whole scene of it, everything warmed by the oven and by the sunlight pouring in through the vast kitchen windows, the soaring voices that wrap themselves around Will and Hannibal, and the mournful orchestra contrasting how bright Will feels at the sight of Hannibal so plainly chuffed.

"Please, come," Hannibal offers, while Will drifts into the kitchen, face still flushed from the early morning chill. Hannibal pulls out the chair for him at Will's usual spot and Will sits, bemused.

"Plying me with scones won't work, Hannibal," Will says, only half teasing. "Just tell me what you want."

"I want for nothing," Hannibal replies as he pushes Will's chair in and takes a seat next to him. He unfolds his napkin on his lap with a flourish. "I'm simply eager to share this new scone recipe. I've made some adjustments I think you'll enjoy."

Will raises his eyebrows in suspicion but then Hannibal smiles at him, gestures again at the little pastry— sitting so harmlessly on its small blue plate— and Will's resistance is wiped from him. He takes a bite. His eyes close of their own volition, closing out everything else in

the world except the tang of the cranberries, the popping choral voices rising up and over each other like the foam on cresting waves, the layers of mourning folded in, and the smooth, drawn-out base notes of dark chocolate and melancholy strings.

“Wow,” he murmurs. When he opens his eyes, Hannibal is smiling wide enough to show his teeth, practically ecstatic by Hannibal’s standards.

“Bach’s St. Matthew Passion,” Hannibal says, “I thought it was a nice pairing.”

Another discovery, yet one that doesn’t come as a surprise given everything else Will knows about him: Hannibal considers how well the music and the food will compliment each other.

“A bit late for Easter,” Will observes.

“Not at all. It’s today, in fact.” Hannibal replies. “In the Eastern tradition, that is.”

“Oh.” Will hadn’t even realized it was Sunday. It’s not something he’s bothered to keep much track of here. “What did you give up for Lent?”

Hannibal tilts his head back a smidge, watches Will with thoughtfulness for a moment, and then looks back to the table. (Another tally to add to Will’s list of newfound information: Hannibal is capable of running out of words, so long as Will is the one that exhausts them). He turns his cup in it’s saucer until the handle is perfectly parallel to the table’s edge then meets Will’s eyes and says:

“The sacrifices of Lent pale in comparison to the beauty of God’s grace. It’s the ultimate display of devotion, but such a small penance to pay for the joyous celebration of Jesus’s return. There is nothing I wouldn’t give to be closer to such divine mercy and all-consuming love. ”

Has anyone been ever loved as deeply, as fiercely, to such disastrous, ecstatic ends? The saints, perhaps, as their martyrdom came to an end, but even that seems doubtful. To Will, such intense love feels like akin to a violence, something new they’ve invented together, and looking at Hannibal now, Will thinks there is nothing more divine than the act of creation.

Will watches as Hannibal sweeps the scone crumbs off the table and into the palm of his hand, dusting them onto his empty plate. His hands are steady and sure as he plucks at the few remaining crumbs, even as Will’s breath shudders on the exhale.

“Please,” Hannibal says, gesturing at the pastry half-forgetten on Will’s plate. “Your food will get cold,” Hannibal says.

Will, overwhelmed and unable to think of an adequate way to reply *yes, yes, yes* to Hannibal’s confession, picks up his scone and takes another bite.

“What’s this one called?” Will asks Hannibal one afternoon. They are in the kitchen again, as they so often are.

Hannibal never seems to bore of cooking and tidying, tending to the abundantly stocked pantry the way some people tend to houseplants or children— with fastidious attentiveness underpinned by genuine affection. This is another thing Will has noticed now that they live together, how Hannibal ensures the kitchen is always teeming with more food than the two of them could eat. The shelves of the pantry are always stocked with at least one backup of each dry good and a new package— of rice or flour or whichever non-perishable is running low— always appear when the first one is barely halfway used. Will had never seen the pantry at Hannibal's Baltimore home, but he imagines it was much the same. It's an adjustment— Will, being so used to taking only what he needs and no extra— but Hannibal wants to provide for him, for them both, and Will finds himself unable to deny him that.

"It's a Schubert piano sonata," Hannibal replies. "Number 21 in B-Flat Major, This is the second movement, Andante Sostenuto, the name for a slow tempo smoothed over by drawn-out notes."

His shirtsleeves are rolled up to the elbows and Will finds himself tracing the flexing of the tendons as he rolls out strips of pasta into round noodles that he said, earlier this afternoon, will be served with a ragu sauce made from wild boar. Genuine wild boar, Will knows, and not a euphemism for a particularly brutish man; the two of them have only talked about their dietary preferences once— a hushed bedtime conversation under the cover of night— and only long enough for Hannibal to apologize that it would be imprudent to cook properly for Will until they are well enough to plan a trip further afield to gather ingredients, so as to not attract suspicion. Since then, Will has surprised himself with how secure he feels in the fact that the real conversation will emerge naturally once it's time.

"Do you like it?" Hannibal asks him.

Will hesitates for a moment and then nods. "It's nice," he adds, suddenly not sure what else to say to describe the way the music rolls over them.

"What do you think of it?" Hannibal asks. He is looking at Will with that same warm curiosity that he's worn to approach nearly everything concerning Will since they've been here.

"I think it sounds the way swimming feels when you're all alone out in deep water, the clouds moving across the sun."

"Beautifully said." Hannibal's eyes crinkle with the hint of a smile. "I think so too. The common rhythms and conventional harmonies allow for the pianist's interpretation to truly shine through. This one is perhaps my favorite performance of this movement; it invokes the sensation of watching the sea shimmer on the distance horizon even as the fog roils around you on the shore, much how I imagine Schubert himself must have felt when he wrote this in the final days of his short life. "

The conversation turns, then, to phrasing and interpretation in classical music, then the interpretation of literature and the follies of literary analysis, to the concept of authorship, to ownership, and then Will realizes it's dark out, and Hannibal is clearing away the dinner dishes, and Will never opened the book he'd originally sat down at the kitchen island to read hours ago, and he realizes that they've shared yet another delectable, gratifying meal together

and not only passed the day together without incident but passed it with genuine pleasure in the other's company, with genuine contentment.

The next morning he runs for the first time, shoulder healed well enough that even Hannibal can't refuse him anymore, taking the mountainside paths at a jog. There's something invigorating about carrying himself along, but by the time he reaches the stream he misses the slowness of his usual mornings, how it lets him open himself wide enough that the feral peace of the wilderness can sink into him. He walks the rest of the way home.

Hannibal, as Will has learned in the past few months, is fastidious about having a shower every morning. Will suspects it's a concession to his routine that Hannibal even waits until after breakfast; by the time he gets home from his walks Hannibal is already dressed in slacks and a button-down but he always changes into an entirely new set of clothes after he's showered. Today, though, he tells Will that he'll do the dishes and allows him to go upstairs to the master bathroom and shower off the sweat from his pseudo-run. It's from the steam of the glass-enclosed shower that he hears the piano played in the living room. Estonian-made, Hannibal had told him a couple of months ago, when his side finally healed enough for him to sit on the piano bench without great discomfort. It felt shockingly intimate the first time he'd heard Hannibal practice, almost like intruding to hear Hannibal repeat a section over and over until he didn't stumble over the final notes.

Today Will drifts back downstairs, towel around his shoulders, to find Hannibal there, tablet propped up against the piano's music stand.

It's the song from yesterday, he recognizes, the one he'd ask the title of. He hesitates in the doorway, listening. He thinks, *Hannibal is learning it for you* , while he watches Hannibal read the music and bring the swelling, roiling water into their home, rays of serenity slipping through the fog and deep into Will's body. No one has ever done something like this for Will before. He has been close to death more times than is his due but the only time it felt this hopeful was when he was poised on the edge of the abyss in Hannibal's arms; if this is what Schubert had felt as he succumbed to death's trembling waters, the sun peeking over the horizon, Will figures it couldn't have been all that bad.

It's for you , Will thinks again, and he goes to Hannibal.

Hannibal pauses, scooching over and gesturing to the spot next to him on the piano bench. "Please," he offers.

They share a long look, one so replete that Will can barely even begin to decipher the meaning, before he nods and sits next to him. There is barely enough room for the both of them and he knows the damp towel around his shoulders is certainly wetting Hannibal's shirt, but he doesn't move. He closes his eyes, feels the weight and presence of Hannibal pressed against him and listens to Hannibal play him a song.

Spring in northern Canada hasn't lent itself to sunshiny days. This is not news to Will; although the climate where he spent his last three years in Maine isn't quite as harsh, it was similar enough to extrapolate how much harsher the mountainous hinterlands would be. What is news to him, is that he's naturally much paler than Hannibal. This had never been the case

in Baltimore when Will had spent nearly all his free time outdoors with his pack or on the water, while Hannibal's proclivities mostly involved fellow socialites wining and dining (sometimes on other socialites) or skulking through the night. But now they both spend most of their time inside— Hannibal gets chilled quickly, still recovering from blood loss, and Will finds himself peculiarly unwilling to be far from him for any great length of time— and while Hannibal has maintained the same faint tan he had in the hospital, Will's skin has slid down the scale into the tone of unused printer paper. The first morning he decides to try and trim his beard around the newly formed scar in his cheek, he sees himself in the mirror and realizes he can't recall a time he's ever seen himself look so… translucent, practically. The pallor makes him look sickly, even though he's probably the least sick he's been in nearly five years now.

"I practically glow in the dark," Will jokes to Hannibal one night as they lie side by side in bed, both unable to sleep. He has his hand outstretched in front of him, curling and relaxing his fingers, curious about the new ways the moonlight pouring in from the window plays off the grooves and wrinkles of his knuckles, off the silvery circular scars in the center of his palm from the time he had to untangle Muffintop— one of his and Molly's dogs— from some barbed wire she'd gotten herself trapped in. It's still bright in the bedroom despite the late hour, the moon swollen to fullness. They've gotten in the habit of leaving the curtains open here; Will is trying to not let it represent anything more than that. But it's hard not to read more into it— into all of this— when the moonlight leaves him feeling… not exposed, but *seen* . There's nowhere else to go, not with the scant few inches separating them.

Will has often obsessed over the odd comfort of sharing a bed with Hannibal these past couple of months, ever since there was no longer the excuse of injury and illness to hide behind. But despite that he doesn't leave; Hannibal doesn't ask him to, and Will's not sure he wants to remember what it's like to wake without the sight of Hannibal's lips parted in sleep, or to the sight of Hannibal lying on his side watching him sleep, both of their bedhead spread across the pillows.

(A discovery: Hannibal gets the most ridiculous bedhead, hair sticking up in every direction — inexplicably, because he doesn't toss and turn like Will does and is, in fact, eerily still in sleep.)

(Another discovery: the hair product Hannibal uses is stupidly expensive and wildly unnecessary— it's not like there's anyone around to impress except Will and what an unappreciative audience Hannibal must think him.)

(And yet another: Hannibal's hair smells so wonderful that Will wants to rest his cheek on the top of Hannibal's head and never move again, wants to press his nose into that mix of fancy shampoos and gels and that scent that can only be described as *Hannibal* , and breath it until his last breath.)

The sheets rustle, and Will looks over to find Hannibal on his side now, one arm tucked under his pillow, the other resting in the several inches of demilitarized zone demarcating the space between their bodies, and his whole attention turned on him. Will stills, hand raised above them with fingers splayed. *There is time to stop this* , Will thinks as he watches Hannibal's hand move towards him, so slow and telegraphed that there is plenty of time for Will to pull

away if he wants to. And yet he doesn't want to. He lets Hannibal slot his fingers between Will and fold their hands into each other.

Will closes his eyes; something about the way his breath is just barely stirring Hannibal's hair makes this moment feel too fragile. Or maybe that's just Hannibal's perception of him bleeding into his own because right now Will himself feels very, very fragile. Hannibal guides their hands towards him and kisses Will on the inside of his wrist, right at the point where his pulse crashes through him.

"You're radiant," Hannibal whispers against the delicate skin there. "Resplendent."

"I'm reflective," he retorts. "Isn't that what you like about me? That I'm a mirror you can hold to yourself?"

There is a long silence while Hannibal considers, both of them watching each other for so long that Will feels his eyes start to droop despite himself, and, listening to the even sounds of Hannibal's breathing, he begins to think Hannibal has also fallen asleep. This, too, is part of why Will cannot imagine sleeping without Hannibal by his side anymore: their quiet, musing growing fainter, their responses drifting further apart, as they bob against the current of sleep, the conversation sliding away the same way the seashore slopes away to the depths of the ocean floor.

"Isn't that what all love is? Discovering yourself alongside another?"

But before he can respond, he is dragged under by sleep. He does not know this now, as his last conscious thoughts collapse underneath him, but tonight he will wake suspended in nightmares as if in agar. The sensation of forcing air into his lungs is nothing new,and neither are the subconscious images of Hannibal being killed, but now they instill in him a new type of panic that can only be soothed by the sound of Hannibal's voice. He will be lulled by the feeling of Hannibal rubbing his thumb across the back of his hand where they're still clasped in between their bodies and by the weight of Hannibal's hand on the side of his head where he rests it after brushing Will's sweat-soaked hair from his eyes. He will feel a deep, gnawing shame. But in the morning, Will's memory of this will be faint, just as it is most nights, Hannibal ushering him back into sleep so quickly that the line between dream and reality is blurred far enough to encompass these late-night episodes as well. These nights will get less and less frequent the longer they stay here— the nights where he comes back to himself standing at the dresser frantically filling a duffel bag, panicked that someone is after them until Hannibal takes the bag away and guides him back to bed— and then even less frequent beyond that as well, even once they've built a new home elsewhere with a different bed they share.

But these are not things that either Will or Hannibal know yet. What they do know is that they are together, their soft breaths mingling and curling up between them like a third creature of its own. And, wrapped like a set of parentheses around this third creature they have made together, they sleep, as they do most nights, hand in hand.

It seems that the kitchen is where they hold most of their serious conversations, the room in the house where Hannibal is the most relaxed, the most himself. Often over the weeks that

they have been here now, Will has looked up from his book— *A Sand County Almanac* now, something Hannibal brought home to him earlier in the week saying “the bookseller assured me it was something you might like,” and this, itself, was a discovery: Hannibal talks about him when Will isn’t there— to see Hannibal watching him from the kitchen. But as much as Hannibal has watched him, Will has watched back, marveling at his ease.

Lately, though, Will finds himself less and less inclined to watch from a distance. It has always been impossible to resist seeking him out— like a compulsion, like love— and Hannibal is almost certainly taking advantage of that. He tempts Will by leaving plates of finger foods and snacks on the counter while he prepares meals, keeps the door open when he’s in a room where Will is not, like he’s sitting back to give a feral animal the opportunity to come to him.

“I know what you’re doing,” he told Hannibal from the doorway of his study one morning, Hannibal having retired there after breakfast while Will showered.

Hannibal had clicked off the screen of his tablet, looking up at Will over his reading glasses. Will has always wanted to resent how naturally Hannibal has taken to wearing the wearing glasses that have recently appeared in the house (it’s always felt awkward on Will’s face), how handsome they look on him, but the perching his new glasses on the edge of his nose evokes something entirely different than resentment.

“I’m aware,” Hannibal replied.

“You’re not subtle. You know that, right?”

“I’m often not when it comes to you,” he’d replied, amusement gathering at the corner of his lips.

“I’m not a stray dog,” Will had insisted, determined to get his point across. “You can’t win my trust like one.”

“Of course not,” Hannibal had agreed. “A stray dog couldn't undo me so easily.”

Will had frowned, the slightest pucker between his eyebrows, and left.

He was back a few moments later, a towel wrapped around his shoulders to catch the stray drips of his now shaggy hair, and settled into the chair behind Hannibal’s desk.

This afternoon, probably just over a week since Will had broached the subject, Hannibal has plied him yet again with small cuts of fruits carefully arranged on a platter for an afternoon snack. He has learned that Hannibal is alarmingly good at divining which foods are Will’s favorites and that he will make them as often as Will wants, procuring ingredients that certainly cannot be abundant so far north this time of year, as if by magic. As he pops a handful of blueberries into his mouth— the burst of the ripe juices tasting like southern summers, rustling in the berry bushes dotted along the creek near the trailer— Will thinks that if he wanted mac ‘n’ cheese for every meal for the rest of his life, Hannibal would probably buy a dairy farm.

“Are you happy?” Will asks him.

Hannibal swallows the apple slice he’s been chewing on and smiles at him. “Exquisitely so. Are you happy, Will?”

There is some part of Will that thinks he should be worried about this newfound peace, that he should be worried about what carnage might happen if their happiness runs out, that he should be worried about what the could inflict upon each other, what they could inflict upon the world. But he’s not. He looks at the monster leaning on his elbows, across from Will at the kitchen island, twisting an apple slice in his hand to catch the string of caramel dripping back into the bowl— and here marks another thing he’s learned, that Hannibal has a sweet tooth. He feels a streak of possessiveness so fierce he wants to tear Hannibal limb from limb just to preclude the possibility that anyone else would ever do it; he wants to bundle Hannibal in his arms and seclude him from the world in their safe haven, to protect him for all who would see him harmed. Hannibal would let him do either, do both. Will is finding himself newly inclined to do only the latter these days, since their sojourn together here.

Will opens his mouth and leans over the island towards Hannibal, who only looks puzzled for a flash of a moment before he gets the idea. Hannibal leans forward too, placing the caramel-covered slice of apple on his tongue like a communion wafer. The sugar melts on his tongue and Will bites down, the crisp apple giving under his teeth with a soft crunch. Rapturous, Hannibal watches him swallow and then takes the piece of apple Will left in his fingers and eats it himself, Will’s eyes tracing the bob of his Adam’s apple through its whole path.

They’ve already done the worst to each other, so what else is left now besides this? He is Hannibal’s monster, just as Hannibal is his.

“Yes, Hannibal. Exquisitely so,” he echoes.

By now, Will’s walks have long since become routine, one that Hannibal hasn’t even attempted to encroach on. That alone makes Will suspicious.

Earlier on, soon after Will was well enough to begin these long walks, he would wake just before dawn and slip out without waking Hannibal. In hindsight, he suspects that Hannibal was probably pretending to be asleep because he’s since learned that Hannibal is an even lighter sleeper than he’d always imagined. But at the time, it felt like a necessary precaution to prevent Hannibal from inviting himself along. Now they both sleep in more often than not, nothing urging them to leave the cocoon of their blankets. It’s a kind of luxuriating that Will has never experienced before, not for any extended amount of time, and the restlessness that builds in him from the relaxation is what usually propels him from bed.

“Are you off?” Hannibal asks him this morning as Will sits on the edge of the bed. This, too, has now become part of the routine, even this short parting feeling too significant to endure without a goodbye.

“In a minute,” Will replies. He fiddles with the hem of the pullover fleece in his lap and Hannibal sits up in bed next to him, stilling Will’s hand by covering it with his own.

“Then maybe you would like to lie back down in that minute between now and then,” Hannibal says and leans forward until his head is resting on Will’s shoulder. He’s shirtless and the feeling of his sleep-mussed warmth makes something quiver then crumble inside Will.

“Maybe you’d like to come with me instead.”

Hannibal, already slouched against Will in repose, grows even more still, preternaturally so in his attentiveness. “Are you extending an invitation?”

“Not indefinitely,” he clarifies. “Just this morning. Call it a trial run.”

In an almost uncharacteristic display of excitement, Hannibal rushes through dressing while Will watches from the bed, bemused and almost guilty, having not realized that Hannibal cared about coming along with Will on these walks. While Will leads them down his favorite route to the stream, Hannibal is remarkably unobtrusive— no extended expounding on the differences between Classical and Romantic understandings of nature, no questions about where they’re going or suggestions on how to get there, nothing that would intrude on the peace and solitude Will takes these walks to seek out. There is something comforting about being alone together but, Will figures, that’s often how they’ve been.

He is learning too , Will thinks, hearing Hannibal’s footsteps come to a stop beside him when Will himself stops so as to not disturb the small family of skunks toddling by further up the path. *He wants to be good to you, he just doesn’t always know how to.*

The path to the stream is steep and rocky. Will doesn’t realize that he’d been expecting some kind of complaints from Hannibal— who he’s always viewed as urbane through and through — until there are none by the time they arrive. Hannibal pulls a glass container and two water bottles from the small pack he insisted on bringing and they settle on a boulder outcropping over a cascade in the stream. Will takes a handful of granola when Hannibal holds out the container to him and together they munch on the toasted oats and berries while the stream rushes by.

“Did you just have this on hand in anticipation of this exact moment,” Will teases, gesturing to the bowl of granola perched on Hannibal’s thigh where their legs are pressed together, “or did you somehow magically whip this up in the three minutes you disappeared into the kitchen?”

Hannibal’s eyes shine with amusement, and with something Will is wary to call bliss. “As implausible as it may sound, I purchased this at the market in town last week. But yes, I might have hoped that I’d find myself in a situation like this one.”

“You're glad to be here,” Will observes.

“I’m always glad to be wherever you are.”

Will exhales slowly until he’s confident his voice won’t shake.

“I trust you, Hannibal,” he begins haltingly. “But I don’t know if I should.”

“You make it sound like trusting another is something we have any say in. But trust is rarely preceded by a conscious decision. It’s rather like love in that regard.”

Will can’t help but shake his head, though he’s not sure at what part of Hannibal’s response. “I feel like this is a conversation we've had a hundred times before even if we've never spoken these words aloud.”

“Tragedy is by its very nature repetitive. That's what makes it a tragedy— by precluding all other paths out.”

“Is that what we are?” Will asks. “A tragedy?”

Beneath them, the stream murmurs its response; Will only wishes he could make out what it meant, what it all meant— the peace they’ve found here in their home suspended on the mountainside, the almost fairytale beauty of the forest surrounding them, the intimacy that took root between them long ago now reaching new heights, the new snippets of Hannibal he’s been hoarding like magpie decorating itsnest, each new quirk as shiny as a gem fallen loose from a ring and loved all the more for the very fact that no one else will love them.

“What would you like us to be, Will?”

He wishes he had an answer to that.

“You and I are more akin to the aftermath of trauma, to the mind’s desperate bids to resolve the past by repeating the same situations over and over in the hopes that this time things will work out.”

“And will it? Work out this time, that is,” Hannibal replies.

Something inside Will yanks him to reply *no. No, things can never work out between us* , that old instinct to hurt gives him the words like a branch on fire, like something Will has to force on Hannibal just so it’ll stop burning Will’s hands. But the look on Hannibal’s face— so openly, painfully hopeful— stops him.

“I want it to,” Will replies, and the sudden truthfulness of it strikes him so heavily that he can barely force the words up his throat.

Hannibal reaches for his hand, where Will is plucking at a loose thread on the hem of his sleeve and takes it in his. Will squeezes back.

They listen to the stream crash down the rocks for a while longer before they rise and walk towards home again.

The newest on the list of things Will has learned since he was reborn from the waters of the Atlantic: Hannibal will often hum to himself when he thinks he’s alone, or sway his head in the time with music, as a snake would follow the tune of a charmer. Will finds it endearing— not a word he’d ever thought he’d associate with the notorious Hannibal Lecter (killer of men, devotee of indulgence), but nonetheless, it’s what he thinks when he rises from a nap to

find Hannibal reclined on the couch, reading glasses poised on his nose, tracing his head through the air in tight arcs along the curves and dips of the concerto playing on the speakers — played softly, so softly as to not wake Will. That is itself something else that Will is finding himself less and less suspicious of with time, the feeling of Hannibal's keen power to *notice* Will being used to consider his comfort instead of inflict pain.

Hannibal does this, too, when he's cooking. That is how Will finds him this evening, whipping cream for dessert as, under his breath, he breathes the words of the opera he's playing over the speakers. It's not one Will recognizes, which is an odd thing to even think; he's never been the kind of person to recognize operas at all, and now, after spending so much time listening with Hannibal, he has favorites.

"Hannibal?" Will asks.

His head snaps up, but then his eyes find Will and his face softens into that hint of a smile that Will knows means he's glad that Will is joining him— he's always glad when Will joins him, Will has realized.

" *Eugene Onegin* , the final scene," Hannibal replies in lieu of a greeting. "Our young protagonist has realized he can never be with the lovely Tatyana and yet he still begs her to leave her life for him when he hasn't earned that devotion. He's drained his life of all meaning and betrayed his only friend in the pursuit of passing pleasures and his imagined version of her. All because he was too selfish to let himself see her from the start."

Will tries to ignore the parallels there. "And so he laments," he says.

Hannibal nods, securing the top on his mixing bowl while the duet reaches its peak. "With all other avenues closed off to him, there is nothing left to do but turn his woe into something beautiful. Pushkin warns us against the dangers of Romanticization and yet Tchaikovsky makes Onegin's suffering so beautifully."

He tucks the bowl of whipped cream into the fridge as something on the stove begins to bubble, and turns his back to Will so he can tend to the burbling sauce.

"Dinner will be ready momentarily," Hannibal says over his shoulder, "Could you please set the table, dear?"

Will stops himself from freezing entirely but only barely. It still catches him off guard sometimes, this new thing he's learned: Hannibal is very partial to pet names. This isn't particularly surprising to Will— he can see the appeal for Hannibal in the theatrics of it, in the possessiveness, in the open and frequent declarations of devotion— but what he *is* taken aback by is how much he likes it. It's only happened a handful of times: *dear heart* , Hannibal calls him when Will brings him a cup of tea to his study where Hannibal is sketching before curling up in the nearby armchair with a book. *My remarkable boy* , Hannibal hums, circling appreciatively around the dark, glimmering wooden chest Will had built for the foot of the bed when Hannibal commented on the lack of blanket storage nearby and, when he stops next to Will— who feels so full he fears his seams might split— he leans into the embrace once Will slowly, tentatively, puts an arm around his shoulder. Each time the words come to Hannibal so smoothly, so easily, it seems nearly unconscious. *My dearest* , he

calls Will the most often but it's less of a pet name and more of an adjective. *I am dear to him* , Will thinks every time and then, in quick succession, thinks how obvious it's been.

Once they're both sitting in the dining room, Hannibal says: "Nearly all my schooling was in Russian until my uncle took me in as his ward."

The centerpiece— though Hannibal had denied that he'd set the table this elaborately when he was dining alone in Baltimore, Will can barely believe that all this show is just for him— is piled high with flowers and oranges that Hannibal gets from God knows where.

"Our parents hired tutors for Mischa and me to teach us English and French. We were little terrors," he continues with an affectionate smile, voice underpinned by the distant thrum of laughter buried within time. "We both picked it up quickly— Mischa especially— and we used our new vocabulary to torment our teachers."

"Am I supposed to be surprised by that?" Will teases, amused himself and basking in the warmth of Hannibal's fond recollections. The music has ended now, Onegin's final lamentations faded into nothing, but the swelling sounds of the spring night outside— the whispering of the wind, the chittering of birds settling in for the evening— and the sounds of cutlery on china has filled its place. "Words have always been your best weapon."

"For certain opponents, yes," Hannibal teases in return and Will, inexplicably, feels himself blush. " *Eugene Onegin* always puts me in a nostalgic mood, more so now than before."

Before what? Will wonders. Before Abigail gave him a reprise of something he'd thought lost to him forever? Before Will had made him understand the pain of Tatyana's rejection? He thinks he should be upset, bitter, but instead, he is too warm— from the fireplace Hannibal tends to diligently, from the all-encompassing affection— and too well-fed to feel anything except contentment. He knows so little of Hannibal's life before he had crafted himself into the man Will met in Baltimore.

"The opera reminds me of all the times I was made to read the novel in grade school, more times than I can count, enough to make any boy resent the story and the language used to force it upon him." He pauses, turns his fork over in his hand once, twice, then speaks again as he sets about meticulously arranging the perfectly constructed bite on the tines. "To this day I can't read Lithuanian very fluently; I haven't spoken it in decades now, either, so I can't imagine my vocabulary is any better than that of a very precocious twelve year old."

Hannibal doesn't speak of it like a loss, but rather as a curiosity. Will finds himself turning his own fork over and over in his hand, surprised by something that Will never would have predicted about Hannibal. Resentment of his first language, rejection of it? Sure, that always seemed likely to Will, a reasonable leap of logic from the orphaned young boy to the Hannibal he'd always known to embody the mantle of Western European refinement. But an *inability* ? There is so little of a filter between his mindset and Hannibal's anymore, the fluidity of the two simmering inside him. Hannibal is not incapable— he could certainly gain fluency if he wanted to— but this, Will can see, *is* his rejection in his refusal to pick up the heritage that had been assigned to him, rather than the narrative of himself that he'd so diligently crafted.

“Maybe you could help me brush up on my French,” Will replies.

The conversation veers, then, to the bits of Creole Will had picked up among the dock workers of his youth, to language education in the United States, to the pedagogy of French education, to the possibility of relocating to Morocco if they ever decide to leave their hideaway in the Rockies. Hannibal serves them dessert with his usual elan— the whipped cream making a reappearance, now dolloped on top of a handmade gelato with fresh strawberries and a brown sugar balsamic caramel— and Will realizes that there was a test and that he, unknowingly, passed it tonight.

“I was never convinced this was how it could be,” he muses later that night, after dessert.

They have curled up on the loveseat again, Hannibal is reclining against the arm with his knees bent; Will is sprawled out next to him with his legs outstretched, rubbing the balls of his feet on the plush rug that surrounds them, their couch like a boat in the center of a small maroon sea. Hannibal is wearing a dark purple sweater and sweatpants— or at least his approximation of sweatpants, the soft, charcoal gray joggers with elastic cuffs that Will also has in forest green— as he often does at night, changing into more comfortable clothes for the evening, something he never did when they would share a drink by the fire after dinner in Baltimore. Will had tucked a blanket around Hannibal before settling down next to him, the red one that’s made of flannel and fleece, while Hannibal looked up at him with so much awe that Will had to duck his head to avoid it. Next to each other, they look like they’re dressed for two entirely different climates— Hannibal swaddled in layers up to his chin and Will is in his regular tee shirt and jeans, the back of his neck flushing where he’s warmed by the fireplace behind them. He’s never understood Hannibal’s intense aversion to the cold, but the realization that he might someday learn why laps against the edges of his mind, like sinking into a hot bath.

“How so?” Hannibal asks.

“I never thought we could expose our soft underbellies to each other without sinking teeth into the vulnerable flesh.”

There is a pause; Hannibal runs his fingers up and down the stem of the wine glass in his hand, the deep red of it shimmering in the firelight. “Is that what you want?” he asks, finally looking up at Will.

Will frowns. “Does it matter? What I want?”

“Yes,” Hannibal says and Will is surprised by the intensity, the certainty of his statement. “What you want matters to me very much.”

“It didn’t always.”

“No,” Hannibal concedes. “Not always.”

Another long moment of consideration. “What changed?” Will asks.

Hannibal shifts under his blanket, his cold toes brushing the side of Will's thigh. Without thinking, Will lifts his leg and rests it gently on top of Hannibal's foot, warming the toes underneath it.

"If you want to feel teeth rending your flesh," Hannibal says eventually, "I would gladly take a bite from you. If you want to feel the give of soft flesh splitting in your mouth, then I would find no greater joy than offering you my neck in supplication."

Will licks his bottom lip, considering. "Why?" he finally settles on asking. There are so many many things he wants to know, but none of his questions feel good enough.

"Would you believe me if I said it's because you deserve to be cherished?" Hannibal says, and Will can't bear to look at him for fear he might find sincerity there.

"Why?" Will presses, trying to keep his voice hard with insistence but he hears his question voiced with strain, so quiet he's not sure Hannibal can hear him but he must because Hannibal shakes his head.

"Certainly you already know," Hannibal says, voice low. It's dark outside now, no moon tonight, and their fire behind them illuminates the windows into a mirror, their reflected faces looming over them.

"I need to hear you say it. Please."

"The reasons why I cherish you are too rich, too plenty to express with words."

"Try," Will insists.

And so, because Will asked him to, Hannibal does.

Spring gives way to summer and the two of them flourish as the forests do. Will starts a garden in the backyard, a small spit of land that quickly gives way to the slope of the mountainside again. He's surprised by how quickly his plants yield oblong, oddly shaped cucumbers and small, plump tomatoes— bright red and glistening shiny when he brings them inside to Hannibal.

Hannibal doesn't look up when the kitchen door closes, nor when Will settles onto the creaky bench by the door to untie his shoes. Will goes to him and sets the tomatoes on the counter next to Hannibal

"Here," Will says. "For you."

Hannibal blinks at him once, twice, and then his face softens with the barest hint of a smile.

Will doesn't know if Hannibal has always spent this much time in his mind and Will was simply never there to see it, or if this is a new habit since the hospital when he had nowhere else to go but inside himself. Will is only just learning to consider the possibility that it could be something more nefarious, something insidious— something like being comfortable around Will, something like trusting him. But cataloging each new entry in his encyclopedic

knowledge has begun to seem much less important lately, when observing Hannibal, learning him, has become so second nature. Every day brings a new realization about him, about how they are together; every day brings new joys he'd never let himself imagine before.

"Will," he says in greeting and picks up one of the tomatoes tenderly, cradling it in the palm of his hand. "They're lovely."

And then there are the things that have long been obvious, but that Will is only now just learning anyway: that Hannibal looks at Will like he is a holy revelation. That says Will's name like it's a prayer. That he is *beautiful* , so beautiful in his entirety that Will feels caught by the enormity of his feelings for Hannibal yet again.

They've both been in high spirits these past few weeks and the music Hannibal plays has been changing too, brighter sonatas and lighter concertos that match the sunshine that pours in through the kitchen windows and the heat of their skin where the places they touch burst into blossoming radiance. Right now he's playing a piano piece, something light and warm that Will doesn't recognize. There isn't anything out of place on the counters and Will realizes that Hannibal hasn't been cooking, but had been leaning against the kitchen island because it faces the windows above the sink, the best view in the whole house for the garden where Will had been working all afternoon. Just as Hannibal had been watching him then, he is watching Will again now with a mirth that threatens to bubble over and scald them both with its foaming happiness. Hannibal sets the tomatoes down on the island behind him.

"May I have this dance?" he asks, offering a hand to Will.

Will feels himself almost take a step back on instinct, and barely reels in that gut reaction before he does, tensing instead.

"You're not supposed to exert yourself," he replies.

"I'd hardly call slowly dancing to a three minute piece an 'exertion'," Hannibal says, voice warm with amusement.

Will's eyes narrow. The request is shocking, really, more than anything else. Hannibal asking Will to indulge him isn't the suspicious part, nor is Will afraid of all the things Hannibal could do to him if Will took his hand; Will knows all the things he could do to Hannibal just as easily but he knows that's not what either of them wants from the other anymore. But the uncomplicated frivolity of it, the spontaneous playfulness of dancing together on a warm summer afternoon— that's not something they've ever had.

"What's your game here?" he asks.

Hannibal hesitates a moment, head just barely tilting to the side before he drops his hand, bringing it back to rest against the side of his thigh

"Have you considered that perhaps I just want to dance with you?" he asks.

"Nothing is ever that simple with you, Hannibal," Will says, shaking his head.

“Couldn’t it be, though?” Hannibal asks.

And at something in the way Hannibal says it, in its open hopefulness, that finally cracks open Will’s pride and lets his own hopefulness spill out of him. As long as they’ve been tucked away in the folds of this mountainside, Will has never had any doubts that he wanted this, this life they’ve been building together. What he *had* doubted was that he could have it. Hope has never gotten him very far before, a fickle friend who left Will to do the hardest work of life. But maybe he and Hannibal can have this, here, together. Maybe they can. And so he takes Hannibal’s hand.

“What are we doing?” Will asks. Hannibal situates his free hand on Will’s shoulder and Will, on instinct, tucks his free hand into the small of Hannibal’s back.

“You’re leading,” Hannibal replies but Will shakes his head.

“I don’t know if I’m the most qualified for that job,” Will half-jokes. He can’t even find the beat of the piano piece playing over the speakers to count it out but Hannibal seems intent on Will guiding them and so they stand, holding each other, until Will takes a shuffling step to the left. Hannibal follows. Then a step backward and Hannibal steps forward to fill the space he’d occupied. The music sounds like Chopin if Will had to wager a guess, and he doesn’t think it’s not the kind of thing meant to be danced to, but Hannibal’s graceful confidence in following each of Will’s unsure steps makes it easier for Will to trust himself until, in the space between the kitchen island and the counter, they’re doing a simple box step — maybe a bit out of time to the music, but so easily in tune with each other, until Hannibal’s arm is slung around Will’s neck and Will is pulling them close with the hand on the small of Hannibal’s back, pressed chest to chest, so close that all they can do is take small shuffling steps and then, eventually, a slow sway.

Hannibal nuzzles his cheek into Will’s hair; Will tucks his head into the crook of Hannibal’s neck.

“I want to kiss you,” Will whispers, lips moving against the pulse point of Hannibal’s throat.

“I know,” Hannibal whispers back.

“I’ve wanted to kiss you since that night— afterward, when we were on the beach,” he says, knowing that Hannibal knows what he’s talking about. “Probably even longer, I just didn’t know it yet.”

“I know,” Hannibal repeats.

“Do you know why I haven’t yet?”

Hannibal’s fingers tighten where they’re curled into Will’s shirt. “Because you need to understand me before you can see me again.”

Will exhales, breath shuddering.

“And do I see you, Hannibal?” he asks and, pressed so tightly together, feels Hannibal’s chest expand with a deep inhale. Will would crawl inside Hannibal’s chest if he could, sustain himself on Hannibal’s breath alone.

“Yes, Will. You do. I would strip myself bare for you if you only asked.”

Will clutches Hannibal even more tightly. The thing is, Will won’t ask. He doesn’t need to. Hannibal has already revealed all of himself; there is only one last thing Will needs to know.

“Is it true,” Will begins, willing himself to not trip over his words, “that you want to kiss me too?”

“Yes. Yes.” Hannibal ducks his head to meet Will’s eyes even as his fingers dig tightly into the space between Will’s shoulder blades, into the soft gaps between his ribs, like he can’t bare to pull away even enough to look at Will’s face unless he has a strong enough grip that he’s sure there’s nowhere else Will could go. There isn’t— anywhere else Will could go, that is. If Will turned away now, it would be the end of them both. He won’t; he can’t. But most importantly, he doesn’t want to anymore. To know something so deeply is to love it, and there is no one he knows as completely as Hannibal.

“I’m going to kiss you now,” Will says.

And then he does.

End Notes

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